

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION TARGETS INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS

WASHINGTON, APRIL 4 -- An independent Commission on Intellectual Property Rights, Innovation and Public Health presented a report to the World Health Organization (WHO) April 3 that recommends key actions needed to ensure that poor people in developing countries have access to products to diagnose, treat and prevent common diseases.

More than half of those in the poorest parts of Africa and Asia lack regular access to essential medicines because they cannot afford them or because of weak health systems in their countries.

The 10-member commission represented 10 countries – Argentina, Egypt, India, Italy, Japan, South Africa, Switzerland, Thailand, the United Kingdom and the United States – and the perspectives of government, industry, public-private partnerships, science, medicine, law and economics. WHO Director-General Dr. Lee Jong-wook established the commission in February 2004.

Apart from access to existing medicines, some health products for diseases that disproportionately affect developing countries are not developed because there is no sustainable market, according to a WHO press release.

The relationship among intellectual property rights, innovation and public health is at the heart of debate on these issues.

The report, Public Health, Innovation and Intellectual Property Rights, comes after two years of analysis about how governments, industry, scientists, international law and financing mechanisms can work best to overcome such challenges.

"There is now global momentum to address these issues, and we have a unique opportunity to build on this," said Commission Chair Ruth Dreifuss, former president of Switzerland.

The report, which was commissioned by the World Health Assembly, WHO's governing body of 192 member states, contains more than 50 recommendations that serve as a road map for tackling the issues in different country settings.

An intergovernmental working group of the WHO executive board will consider the report at a meeting April 28. The World Health Assembly then will examine and debate the report during its annual meeting May 22-27. The assembly will decide how to apply the report findings.

Text of the press release

(<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2006/pr18/en/index.html>) and the complete report

(<http://www.who.int/intellectualproperty/documents/thereport/en/index.html>) – in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Spanish and Russian – are available on the WHO Web site.

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